The Ballot and the Riot:
South-South Migration, Elections and Violence in South Africa

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Abstract

Little is known about the political consequences of immigration in developing countries. In this paper, we estimate the effect of exposure to immigration on election outcomes, protests and violence against foreigners in South Africa. Our analysis is based on municipality panel data and an instrumental variable strategy exploiting historical migrant settlement patterns. We find that local immigration concentration has a negative impact on the performance of the incumbent African National Congress. Support for the main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance, is found to increase in municipalities with a larger immigrant presence. The presence of immigrants also benefits the main challenger opposition party running in General elections. Part of these effects seem to be channelled via higher voter participation. Our results also indicate that the number of xenophobic protests and violent events increase with immigration. Our analysis of mechanisms suggests that competition over jobs and local public services as well as initial exposure to foreigners and diversity influence how immigration affects election outcomes. These findings are robust to a broad range of sensitivity checks.

Keywords: immigration, elections, protests, violence, South Africa

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